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C O N F I D E N T I A L TEGUCIGALPA 001870

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SUBJECT: BOTH LIBERAL AND NATIONALISTS WORRY PRESIDENT ZELAYA IS TRYING TO PULL A "CHAVEZ"

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, James Williard, reasons 1.4 (b & d)

¶11. (C) Summary. In separate meetings this week, representatives of both the opposition National Party (NP) and President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya's own Liberal Party have expressed concern with Zelaya's possible desires to extend his mandate. On a recent trip to the countryside, Zelaya was quoted as saying he would stay in power not one day more than what the constitution stipulates, as long as the constitution is in force. NP leaders interpreted this to mean that he would attempt to break the constitutional order and surmised that Zelaya would use a positive decision in the case of Congressional President Roberto Micheletti as the catalyst. Liberal Party leader and ex-President Carlos Flores expressed similar concerns in a meeting with the Ambassador on December ¶13. The NP didn't wait to confirm their theories, but immediately went on the attack in the press, warning people Zelaya was trying to extend his reign. Although it may have been premature, the NP's early attack could educate the public about this possible threat and help avoid their predictions coming true. End summary.

National Party concerns

¶12. (C) On Friday, November 30, National Party (NP) leaders Gilberto Goldstein (VP of National Party), Antonio Rivera (Head of the NP slate in the Congress), and Ricardo Alvarez (NP Mayor of Tegucigalpa) told the Ambassador of their party's concern with recent comments made by Zelaya. On a recent trip to Juticalpa, Zelaya said he would stay in power "Not one day more, not one minute more than that which the law and Constitution demand, while this law and Constitution are in force. . ." To support these fears, on December 5, Liberal Party President Paty Rodas was quoted as saying that there are "options" for breaking the constitutional order and allowing Zelaya to continue in power past his mandate. She clarified later, trying to backtrack, but many believe she meant what she said the first time.

¶13. (C) The NP leaders interpreted these statements to mean that Zelaya would respect the law and the Constitution only as long as they are in force. The Nationalists believe that if the Supreme Court finds in favor of President of Congress Roberto Micheletti's bid to run for President while remaining in his powerful leadership position, then the ruling would invalidate all the new rules put into effect before the last

elections. In Zelaya's logic, this would mean the constitutional order has thus somehow been broken, making the constitution null and void. (Comment: Legal experts say that the case being decided is solely about whether Micheletti can run and would not have a necessary effect on the other laws adopted at the same time. Zelaya being able to argue that the constitutional order has been "broken" is a big jump in logic, but the Nationalists think this is his plan. End Comment.)

¶4. (C) In short, the Nationalists are worried. They told the Ambassador they would embark on a plan to reach out to civil society, the Catholic Church, NGOs, international organizations, and embassies to try to counteract this threat before it gets out of hand. They have spoken to Venezuelan opposition figures and believe there are many similarities between what is happening in Honduras and what happened in Venezuela to bring Chavez to power. The Nationalists told us they know they have to get out in front of this issue. Many also worry that Zelaya's extension of General Vasquez Velasquez as Chief of Honduran military forces for at least one year beyond his expected retirement could indicate Zelaya's concern over potential civil unrest in coming months.

Concern within Zelaya's own Liberal Party

¶5. (C) On December 3rd, Ambassador Ford met with former President Carlos Flores, who remains a strong leader within the Liberal Party. Flores expressed deep concern regarding President Zelaya and his administration. Flores said he believes Zelaya is sowing and will continue to sow confusion and chaos, with the goal of calling a constituent assembly that would allow him to remain in power beyond his four-year

mandate. Flores agrees with the Nationalists that Zelaya will use a positive decision in the Micheletti case to try to argue that the constitutional order has been broken and use that as an excuse to call for a constituent assembly. Flores predicted a crisis is coming and said things would get much worse before they got better.

Accusations Go Public

¶6. (C) On December 4, the Nationalists did exactly what they said they would and took the fight public. Lobo appeared on Honduras' most popular morning talk show, Frente a Frente, and blasted the government and Zelaya's plans to "continue in power." Lobo said Zelaya was trying to do away with the Supreme Court, citing reliable sources who told him Zelaya had said, "We have to get rid of that court." Lobo also accused Zelaya of trying to create an impasse in the National Register of Persons (RNP) so that it no longer issued any identity cards, in order to make it impossible to hold an election. (Comment: Our Consul General has been working closely with the RNP and says it is indeed functioning and issuing identity cards. Where the problem lies, the CG believes, is with the birth certificates used to obtain identity cards. The security of the certificates is poor and the RNP does not have sufficient stocks of the paper necessary to print them. End comment.) Zelaya has begun publicly criticizing the current electoral register, saying that names of the fictitious and deceased need to be removed and those of over 1 million Hondurans outside of the country need to be added before new elections can be held. Rivera told us that the Congress has worked hard to clean up the RNP. It passed a law to reform the institution and update the lists and another law that would designate the RNP a "National Security Agency," but blamed the President for not acting on either. Being designated a National Security Agency would make labor unions, and thus strikes, illegal within the RNP, and protect it from political manipulation.

Zelaya's Response: Let's Go to a Referendum

¶7. (C) Zelaya's response to Lobo's attacks was simple: let's go to a referendum this week to see if people support you or me. Recent polls show Zelaya has lost over 15 points since

August 2007, down to a 55.88 approval rating, but he would still probably be strong enough to win a hastily called referendum.

Comment

18. (C) Comment: People from all sectors have come out of the woodwork to express concern about the direction Zelaya is heading. Although they are worried he will try to extend his mandate, many believe that the constitution is a strong national symbol that is universally respected in Honduras, and that even if average citizens have not read it, they will want to protect it. With the example of Chavez being so prominent in the press on a daily basis and the similarities between what has happened in both countries so obvious, we believe average people will understand a serious threat to democracy. The fact that the Nationalists have come out so quickly and directly should help them educate the public to help them avoid their predictions coming true. End Comment.

WILLIARD